

SUMMARY

It has been argued that even as the U.S. began supporting the French in Indochina, the U.S. missed opportunities to bring peace, stability and independence to Vietnam. The issues arise from the belief on the part of some critics that (a) the U.S. made no attempt to seek out and support a democratic-nationalist alternative in Vietnam; and (b) the U.S. commanded, but did not use, leverage to move the French toward granting genuine Vietnamese independence.

The record shows that through 1953, the French pursued a policy which was based on military victory and excluded meaningful negotiations with Ho Chi Minh. The French did, however, recognize the requirement for an alternative focus for Vietnamese nationalist aspirations, and from 1947 forward, advanced the "Bao Dai solution." The record shows that the U.S. was hesitant through 1949 to endorse the "Bao Dai solution" until Vietnam was in fact unified and granted autonomy and did consistently support the creation of a genuinely independent, non-communist Vietnamese government to supplant French rule. Nonetheless, the fall of China and the deteriorating French military position in Indochina caused both France and the U.S. to press the "Bao Dai solution." In early 1950, after French ratification of the Elysee Agreement granting "Vietnam's independence," the U.S. recognized Bao Dai and initiated military and economic aid, even before transfer of governmental power actually occurred. Thereafter, the French yielded control only pro forma, while the Emperor Bao Dai adopted a retiring, passive role, and turned his government over to discreditable politicians. The Bao Dai regime was neither popular nor efficient, and its army, dependent on French leadership, was powerless. The impotence of the Bao Dai regime, the lack of any perceptible alternatives (except for the communists), the fact of continued French authority and control over the GVN, the fact that the French alone seemed able to contain communism in Indochina -- all these constrained U.S. promptings for a democratic-nationalist government in Vietnam. (Tab 1)

The U.S.-French ties in Europe (NATO, Marshall Plan, Mutual Defense Assistance Program) only marginally strengthened U.S. urgings that France make concessions to Vietnamese nationalism. Any leverage from these sources was severely limited by the broader considerations of U.S. policy for the containment of communism in Europe and Asia. NATO and the Marshall Plan were of themselves judged to be essential to our European interests. To threaten France with economic and military sanctions in Europe in order to have it alter its policy in Indochina was, therefore, not plausible. Similarly, to reduce the level of

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military assistance to the French effort in Indochina would have been counter-productive, since it would have led to a further deterioration in the French military position there. In other words, there was a basic incompatibility in the two strands of U.S. policy: (1) Washington wanted France to fight the anti-communist war and win, preferably with U.S. guidance and advice; and (2) Washington expected the French, when battlefield victory was assured, to magnanimously withdraw from Indochina. For France, which was probably fighting more a colonial than an anti-communist war, and which had to consider the effects of withdrawal on colonial holdings in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, magnanimous withdrawal was not too likely. *dominos*

France, having no such policy incompatibilities, could and did pursue a consistent course with the stronger bargaining hand. Thus, the French were able to resist pressures from Washington and through the MAAG in Saigon to create a truly Vietnamese army, to grant the Vietnamese more local autonomy and to wage the war more effectively. MAAG was relegated to a supply function and its occasional admonitions to the French were interpreted by them as interference in their internal affairs. Even though by 1954, the U.S. was financing 78% of the costs of the war, the French retained full control of the dispensation of military assistance and of the intelligence and planning aspects of the military struggle. The expectation of French victory over the Viet Minh encouraged the U.S. to "go along" with Paris until the conclusion of the war. Moreover, the U.S. was reluctant to antagonize the French because of the high priority given in Washington's planning to French participation in the European Defense Community. France, therefore, had considerable leverage and, unless the U.S. supported Paris on its own terms, the French could, and indeed did, threaten not to join the EDC and to stop fighting in Indochina. (Tab 2)

American thinking and policy-making was dominated by the tendency to view communism in monolithic terms. The Viet Minh was, therefore, seen as part of the Southeast Asia manifestation of the world-wide communist expansionary movement. French resistance to Ho Chi Minh, in turn, was thought to be a crucial link in the containment of communism. This strategic perception of the communist threat was supported by the espousal of the domino principle: the loss of a single nation in Southeast Asia to communism would inexorably lead to the other nations of the area falling under communist control. The domino principle, which probably had its origin at the time of the Nationalist withdrawal from mainland China, was at the root of U.S. policy. Although elements of a domino-like theory could be found in NSC papers before the start of the Korean War, the Chinese intervention in Korea was thought to be an ominous confirmation of its validity. The possibility of a large-scale Chinese intervention in Indochina, similar to that in Korea, was feared, especially after the armistice in Korea.

The Eisenhower Administration followed the basic policy of its predecessor, but also deepened the American commitment to containment in Asia. Secretary Dulles pursued a forthright, anti-communist policy and made it clear that he would not permit the "loss" of Indochina, in the manner the Democrats had allegedly allowed the "loss" of China. Dulles warned China not to intervene, and urged the French to drive toward a military victory. Dulles was opposed to a cease-fire and tried to dissuade the French from negotiations with the Viet Minh until they had markedly improved their bargaining position through action on the battlefield. The NSC in early 1954 was persuaded that a non-communist coalition regime would eventually turn the country over to the Viet Minh. In consequence of this more militant policy, the U.S. Government tended to focus on the military rather than the political aspects of the French-Viet Minh struggle. (Tab 3)

DISCUSSION

II. A. Tab 1 - U.S. Policy and the Bao Dai Regime

Tab 2 - Leverage: France Had More Than the United States

Tab 3 - Perceptions of the Communist Threat to Southeast Asia and to Basic U.S. Interests

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